

**Ich bin nicht ein Berliner: A Reconsideration of Marsden Hartley's  
*Portrait of a German Officer***

Sean Kramer (Faculty Advisor: Marni Kessler)

*Art History*



**Figure 1.** Hartley, Marsden. *Portrait of a German Officer*. Alfred Stieglitz Collection. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

This painting, executed in November 1914, shows Hartley's assimilation of both Cubism (the collagelike juxtapositions of visual fragments) and German Expressionism (the coarse brushwork and dramatic use of bright colors and black). In 1916 the artist denied that the objects in the painting had any special meaning (perhaps as a defensive measure to ward off any attacks provoked by the intense anti-German sentiment in America at the time). However, his purposeful inclusion of medals, banners, military insignia, the Iron Cross, and the German imperial flag does invoke a specific sense of Germany during World War I as well as a collective psychological and physical portrait of a particular officer.<sup>1</sup>

This quotation comes from a section of the description that accompanies an image of Marsden Hartley's *Portrait of a German Officer* from late 1914 (fig. 1) on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's official website. I use this description here because to me it represents a tendency in recent scholarship to privilege the artist's (Marsden Hartley's) biography as well as a precise historic moment (the beginning months of World War I) in interpretations of this painting.<sup>2</sup> My main purpose is not to critique scholarship but rather to reopen the potential for exploring meaning within the painting that biographical and socio-historic readings might otherwise overlook.

I begin my own reading of *Portrait of a*

*German Officer* with a formal analysis of the painting. I then use semiotic theory to begin to unpack notions of a singular, "correct" interpretation of the painting and to emphasize the multiform nature of reception. In this section, I seek to establish that the artist's personal connection to the artwork is not necessarily the most important interpretive guideline for working with this image. I then use examples of letters and numerals within the work to illustrate the plurality of cultural and linguistic processes which inform viewership of the painting. Meanings in a text, I posit, rely on the interaction between the contexts of the viewer and of the author. These meanings consequently change as we pass from the creation of the work of art to the contemporary consumer—i.e. the viewer. Still, semiotics often only concerns itself with a specific, ideal viewer and for that reason the theory only allows for a finite number of interpretations.

I conclude with a postmodern analysis, as I feel such an analysis addresses the discordant, almost cacophonous interplay of meanings which Hartley's *Portrait* visually suggests. Postmodernism, in many ways, deals with the processing and reprocessing of sources, imagery, and borrowed material on all levels of consciousness. Therefore, I examine Hartley's quotations from preexisting visual sources and his engagement with various forms of spectacle in pre-Great War Berlin as seen in *Portrait of a German Officer*. Finally, I consider the fragmented (literally and metaphorically) subject of the painting and complicate the neat, one-on-one associations which scholars often make between the objects represented on the canvas and a specific person in Hartley's life.

<sup>1</sup> "Portrait of a German Officer," Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed April 5, 2012, <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/210008711>.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this essay, I refer mainly to the work of a handful of art historians, namely, Bruce Robertson, William H. Robinson, Patricia McDonnell, Jonathan Weinberg, and Donna Cassidy. These historians, however, also note the work of others which I feel compelled to mention. These include, but are not limited to, Gail R. Scott, Barbara Haskell, and Townsend Ludington.

### Formal Analysis

Marsden Hartley's *Portrait of a German Officer* conveys an intricate complexity which I find simultaneously chaotic and ordered. The main composition hangs in front of a decontextualized, though highly textural black void. The background is essentially little more than two long regions of scumbled dark paint on either side of the canvas. These dark regions of paint only give a limited sense of space, an effect which adds to the cramped and overcrowded atmosphere of the painting. The shapes and images in the painting likewise are bunched up toward a central, vertical axis. This axis follows a white line from the top center of the painting through the vertical bar of a black cross directly below; it then traces the outline of two rectangular shapes which contain numbers; it later becomes muddled in overlying flag shapes but finally rejoins the image along the border of a white-and-red cross image at the bottom center of the canvas. The arrangement of shapes along the left and right margins of the composition conform to the confines of the canvas edges and further emphasizes this same verticality. While the establishment of this axis gives the painting a clearly upward orientation, the composition is still overwhelming. The erect orientation of the image nevertheless endows the painting with a sense of a stately vigor that works against the otherwise riotous, constrained confusion. In fact, I see a sort of imposed order upon the shapes within the composition. It appears as though the images and shapes struggle to break free from the boundaries of the picture plane yet are contained within the painting against their will. Only at the top and barely at the bottom do the forms seem to escape. In all other sectors the dark

regions of the background hold these shapes tightly in check.

Other rectilinear objects mirror the overall erectness of the painting. In the top half of the painting, three narrow bars of alternating black and white each recall this linear quality. So too, do the long, narrow shapes that are reminiscent of poles and spikes which frame the semi-circle at the very top of the canvas.<sup>3</sup> As my eye travels downward toward the center, I see two narrow and elongated rectangular shapes below a large triangle which also repeat this motif. To the left of these shapes is another long, thin sliver of gold which mirrors the left edge of the canvas. Just below, another narrow strip of gold outlines a path toward the bottom center of the canvas, though this band is interrupted by the red, white, and black of an intersecting horizontal flag. Just to the right of this flag-image, a narrow shaft latticed in white ends in a bulbous, rounded form and suggests a phallus. Two other white forms also near the bottom right corner share the same phallic suggestion. The artist repeats this motif directly above in the red and gold protrusion emanating from an ambiguous green, red, and white circle.<sup>4</sup> While to me these are the most identifiable references to linear, phallic imagery in the painting,

---

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Robertson identifies these shapes as lances while William H. Robinson reasons that they may refer to the *pickhelhaubes* on the helmets of German soldiers during the First World War. See Robertson, Bruce, *Marsden Hartley*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995, page 56, and Robinson, William H., "Marsden Hartley's Military," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 76 (1989): 14.

<sup>4</sup> This motif recalls an interesting statement of Marsden Hartley's: "It was the smell of leather made a man of him. Stiffened his spine, gave him the orgiastic sense of being without which nothing happens, and with which all is as it should be. No one can get through anything being soft all the time." Quoted in Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 63-64.

horizontal bands of white and various colors used to render flags also repeat a horizontal configuration, which intersects the vertical one I have already described. The intersection of these two directional arrangements further forms a cross-like schema that visually mirrors the actual depicted Iron Cross which dominates the composition.

The painting confounds any sense of three-dimensionality and many of the shapes even seem to compete for the same level on the picture plane. The black background is mainly visible only along the peripheral edges. As a result, the painting is in a way suffocating. The black-and-white alternating squares which form a checker pattern along the edges dissolve at times into the black area of the background, further making ambiguous any sense of separation among the planes. To a large extent, the repetition of black within the shapes in the foreground confuses a stable reading of the large regions of black along the outer edges of the painting. As I look closely at the image, I also see that the black strips in the flag-images are actually darker than the more charcoal shades of the background. To my mind, these black regions in the foreground objects—the dark bands in both the upper and lower flags, the black Iron Cross in the top portion, and the smaller dark shapes directly above—should seem to recede more so than do the dark regions of the background. As if to confound the viewer's expectation however, the artist places these objects in the foreground. This intensified darkness makes the objects stand out all the more.

The painting contains evident instances of overlap, yet these seem to move and shift and the relationships of the intersecting shapes often come into question. The waving, black-and-white

flag-image in the top half of the painting appears positioned behind other rectangular shapes, yet the viewer cannot accept—given the undulating manner of its representation—that this flag is lying flatly. The image which these curving bars evoke quite naturally recalls a banner flapping in the wind, which contradicts the static nature of the other elements in the immediate vicinity. The rectangular shapes which foreground this waving flag, on the other hand, appear motionless and seem either to sit on top of the flag (which as we have already seen is impossible) or to hang at an undefined distance in front of it. This second option is equally confusing to the eye as the two regions do appear to be directly touching. As a result, space in this region of the painting remains uncertain. The other flag-image toward the lower half of the painting (this one red, white, and black) also complicates the spatial arrangement of the overall painting for it does not exhibit any of the same waving characteristics as the other flag near the top. This bottom flag appears far more languorous, whereas the top flag flutters energetically. Consequently, the locations of these two flags appear to differ, though they exist within the same painting and appear to be on the same level behind the picture plane. This disparity of behavior upsets any sense of a unifying, temporal setting, as the viewer cannot even ascertain a consistent wind pattern.

The artist keeps the detail within the painting to an essential minimum. The viewer is given just enough clues to recognize certain elements that are representative of flags, banners, medals, and other objects, but the artist provides little further information. For the most part, forms are not even modeled as illusionistic or three-dimensional. Tonal changes exist within the painting but

these seem primarily to be arbitrary and in any case do not convey an illusion of three-dimensionality. There are few instances of tonal modulation which might give three-dimensional form to the otherwise flat shapes and these occur mainly near the top right corner of the painting on the images that seem to portray pikes or flagpoles. In fact, these value changes achieve a sort of ominous effect, as though a shadowy presence loomed over and behind the objects in the painting. This region is the only part of the painting which possesses any hint of a cast shadow. The fact that these two shapes are partially shadowed indicates to me a sort of movement: a figure either emerges from a shadowy area or retreats into one.

The artist's brushstrokes are clearly identifiable throughout the entire painting. The paint application is thick and mobile, which imbues the shapes with a rich texture and increases the sense of a dynamic, moving force. "Straight" lines have borders which slip and are not clearly defined, such as those in the triangle shape at the apex of the image. The white-and-blue bars at the right-center of the painting demonstrate a variation on this example. The bars do not have consistent lengths and for that reason the overall shape does not have a stable edge. Another type of slippage occurs in the brief negative spaces of black paint between many of the colored regions throughout the entire painting. Hartley does not delineate outlined borders between the regions; rather, he accentuates the layers of paint by allowing the black background to show through. These spaces emphasize the artificiality of the image. In many of the regions which have black in them, such as the background, the flags, and the Iron Cross, white can be seen just barely

seeping through to the surface. Inversely, this quality is even more strongly the case in areas of white (as well as in regions of other colors) where black is clearly present below the surface. This effect is most noticeable in the white band of the lower-middle horizontal flag-image as well as the white tassel shapes toward the lower right-hand corner of the painting. This quality of paint handling only further confuses the other elements of overlap in the painting.

Though the modeling of tones, for the most part, appears to be arbitrary, the color choices do not. Hartley evidently chooses local colors which relate specifically to the objects which his shapes represent. Accordingly, the colors in the flag-images explicitly refer to the flags which they signify.<sup>5</sup> The image of the Iron Cross must also logically be black with a white border. The gold of the painted flagpoles is meant to mimic the gold of actual flagpoles. This principle no doubt holds true for the white tassels (lower right), the white feathers (lower left), the white stripes (throughout), the white diamonds (lower center), and the white squares (left and right edges). In my estimation, this mimetic use of coloring, as well as the sparse, though precise use of detail facilitate many of the identifications which have become so fundamental to interpretation of this painting.

While black and white are the most prevalent colors within the work, primary colors dominate the viewer's attention and generate the energy which the painting visibly exudes. A muted, jade green appears only in three small circular shapes and one barely noticeable triangle toward the right middle. Slate blue recurs

---

<sup>5</sup> Robinson provides a list of these flags which I cite below in my postmodern analysis.

throughout the painting in much larger areas than the green yet even this color is subdued and seems to act merely as a support for the more dominant hues of red and yellow. Overall, except for the vivid crimson, the vibrancy of the colors within the painting is interrupted by the seepage of black to the surface. This formal decision has a neutralizing effect on the colors and restrains the painting from becoming overly garish, as the composition already borders on overwhelming. Nevertheless, each colorful shape carries its own pulsating energy that makes it seem as if someone has caged or glued these objects into place against their will.

### **Semiotic Analysis**

The most overt interpretive guideline we possess for working with this painting may be in the title itself: *Portrait of a German Officer*. It is the first sign we encounter. Here, we are *told* by the author that we are looking at a portrait. We are also *told* that it is of a German officer. We often take this statement as undeniable truth and, in turn, that information frames our entire investigation of the painting. We, the viewers, are now able to begin identifying each element of the painting in order to establish who exactly this “German officer” is. I do not have to be the one to say that it is Lieutenant Karl von Freyburg; that work has already been done.

Arnold Rönnebeck, the cousin of von Freyburg and another friend of Hartley’s while in Berlin, provides much of the information we need to establish this context. The art historian has figuratively found a cave of gold. Rönnebeck—in his correspondence with Duncan Phillips— informs us that the Iron Cross shape which figures so prominently in the painting references the medal which Rönnebeck himself lent to Hartley.

Hartley, in turn, uses this image to refer to the death of his friend, von Freyburg. In truth, both von Freyburg and Rönnebeck were awarded the honor, though historians are divided regarding whether this occurred before von Freyburg’s death or after.<sup>6</sup> Rönnebeck further tells us that the checker pattern refers to von Freyburg’s love of chess. The number 4 references von Freyburg’s regiment in the Kaiser Guard. *Twenty-four*, as Marsden Hartley once told Alfred Stieglitz (also in a letter), signifies von Freyburg’s age at the time of his death.<sup>7</sup> We also have the spur of von Freyburg’s boot and the plume of his helmet which seem to fit nicely within this arrangement of mementos.<sup>8</sup> Art historians often repeat these identifications which now form the backbone of many interpretations of the painting.

Thus, from the written title of the painting to other written, personal correspondences by the artist and his associates, we have relied largely on written texts in order to understand a visual one. These texts, moreover, serve to reinforce the painting’s subject as a portrait. Nonetheless, the lack of overt figuration within the painting itself complicates its own subject. Figuration and abstraction work visually with each other and against each other in the painting and strain the ideological structures which might otherwise

---

<sup>6</sup> Robertson claims von Freyburg received the medal upon his death while Donna Cassidy and William H. Robinson say he received it the day before he died. See Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 56; Cassidy, *Marsden Hartley: Race, Region, Nation*, (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2005) 229; and Robinson, “Marsden Hartley’s *Military*,” 16.

<sup>7</sup> Hartley also once stated that 4 was his house number in Berlin. See Robinson, “Marsden Hartley’s *Military*,” 16.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, “Marsden Hartley’s *Military*,” 16.

characterize these two modes of representation. In figuration, we have the possibility for a narrative. In abstraction, on the other hand, we want to deny that such a narrative exists. In *Portrait of a German Officer*, forms and shapes, which refer overtly to national flags and military insignia, appear to explode just as they implode in a manner that cannot be easily organized into a recognizable figure. Still, many scholars do read an anatomical ordering to the image. For instance, Bruce Robertson asserts that the arrangement of elements seems to mimic the curvature of a torso and hips, with the lower half of a face reduced to a semi-circle.<sup>9</sup> Robertson's reading, nevertheless, relies upon the contextual narrative of biography which the title of the painting suggests. Without the title, I surmise that the reading of the painting as a portrait would become much less stable.

Art historian Jonathan Weinberg notes that Hartley's own contemporaries outside of his private circle would likely not have understood much of the particular signification within *Portrait of a German Officer*.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as many historians even assert, the painting is a memorial to a personal, private

relationship. How, then, does a twenty-first century viewer have access to his experience? Indeed, now we near a century from the events encapsulated by this painting. What is to be our response? Nothing in my own experience gives me the access to the codes or to the "dropped hairpins"<sup>11</sup> in the painting. To me, it remains a sort of inside joke. While the motifs of military insignia and German nationalism may have certain personal significance to Hartley, these elements make the painting meaningful to the artist in a different way than to the viewer. Upon the painting's completion, furthermore, Hartley no longer functions as part of the historical event (the creation of the artwork), but now joins its host of interpreters. Therefore, even if he has special insight given him due to his role as author of the painting, the object is now separate from him. In temporal terms, he has become disaggregated from his creation and now his only role in connection to the painting is that of spectator. In that light, the identifications which Hartley might make for each sign or for each element on the canvas are merely part of his own interpretation. They do not take us to the end of meaning.

We do, as viewers, possess interpretive signals for decoding this text in the initials and in the numerals. In the bottom left corner the artist depicts the letters Kv.F. In the center of the canvas, a letter E with a suggested Q are depicted next to the number 4 while the number 24 appears toward the bottom right. The shapes used to render these characters

<sup>9</sup> Robertson provides his eloquent description of the formal elements: "It presents the body of Freyburg—headless—as a battle trophy, larger than life: the breastplate or cuirass, defined by flags, becomes the shield behind which the tips of lances project. At lower left and right are a helmet with Freyburg's initials and tassels from the sash, placed to mimic the iliac crest of his hips; at the bottom and center, covering his genitals, is a red cross, with a spur from his boot next to it. And over his heart, on a triangular plate from which hangs regimental tags, is the Iron Cross Freyburg won with his death; instead of a head, there is a circle cut in half." Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 56.

<sup>10</sup> Weinberg, "Marsden Hartley: Writing on Painting," *Marsden Hartley*, ed. Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser et al. (London, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 130.

<sup>11</sup> Patricia McDonnell references George Chauncey's term "dropped hairpins" to indicate subtle messages within artwork or literature which signal homosexual underpinnings. McDonnell, "Essentially Masculine: Marsden Hartley, Gay Identity, and the Wilhelmine German Military," *Art Journal* 56 (1997): 65.



are themselves arbitrary linguistic signs, mostly limited to use in languages originating in Western Europe. In that sense, they contain within their own existence the presence of a Western (a confluence of German and American, as we will see below) orthographic system; and the presence of this system thereby excludes most other forms of written communication. These figures, nonetheless, function in the painting as components of a visual image and not say, as those printed on the page of a book or in a newspaper. The letters are *painted* on. This new context alters their communicative role and destabilizes their meaning as pieces of text. But these letters are not depicted separately on the canvas. They are shown together and in a certain order. The K and the F too, are capitalized while the v is lower-cased. This arrangement implies a specific meaning, or a set of specific meanings, which simultaneously limits as it unlimits the potential interpretations of these signs. Within the codes of that Western language system there are only certain combinations which make sense. Yet we have two language systems with which to potentially work here: English and German. I say this since Hartley was an American yet many of the painting's first audiences would likely have been German.<sup>12</sup> Today, however, access to the image is open to individuals of many more nationalities through journals, magazines, books, the internet, and other sources. Thus the potential linguistic codes which inform viewership of the painting are far more numerous. While this opens possibility for new readings, understanding the letters and numbers as

---

<sup>12</sup> As Robertson mentions, Hartley had one final exhibition in Berlin before his return to the United States. Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 66.

they would function in a text still restricts the painting's interpretation to individuals with access to the visual codes of Euro-American languages.

Other linguistic signs act similarly within the painting, notably the number 4, the number 24, and the letter E. The letter E appears twice in the painting, which distinguishes it from the other letters in the lower left.<sup>13</sup> In the first instance where the letter E appears just below the triangle and cross, a smaller letter Q accompanies the larger E, while in its other incarnation the E stands alone. In this manner, the letter E might very well function differently in each case; on one hand the letter stands alone while on the other, it serves with the letter Q as part of a pair which has a conjunctive meaning.

In a pictorial sense the numbers (or the representation of digits, such as the numeral 4) possess a greater possibility for variation than do their forms written out (such as the word *four*). In reality, these letters and numbers engage with processes of inclusion and exclusion on cultural and linguistic levels which go far beyond Hartley's own personal experience. They entail, as a matter of course, all experiences and all histories which those signs contain in their own right. For one thing, while we might interpret the character 4 as meaning *four*, the painting would have originally been seen by many German audiences, for whom this character signifies *fier*. However, only one system can act upon

---

<sup>13</sup> Weinberg indicates that this letter "E" also functions as an initial. Where he cites Rönnebeck identifying the letter as a sign for Queen Elizabeth of Greece, the patron of von Freyburg's guard, Weinberg also makes mention that it stands for Edmund, Hartley's first name before he had it changed to Marsden. See Weinberg, "Writing on Painting," 130.



the painting at a time. The interpretation of the character 4 as *four* necessarily precludes the interpretation of the character as *fier* and vice versa. Additionally, in the presence of *four*, there is the absence of *fier*. Similarly, the number 24, which English-speakers read as *twenty-four*, might also have been taken to mean by its original audiences in Berlin as *fier-und-zwanzig*. Though a similar situation exists, the interpretive potential is even further complicated in this example since Hartley connects the two characters, 2 and 4, to each other. And so the two numbers act in concert. In this situation, our interpretation of the 2 relies upon our understanding of the 4. Thus, our interpretation of one element affects our interpretation of others. On a larger scale therefore, our interpretation of the 24 in one section of the painting consequently affects our interpretation of the 4, which stands alone in another section. The implications are larger with the initials Kv.F, however, for they affect the interpretation of the entirety of the canvas and not just one single element. Hence, if we accept that the initials Kv.F stand for Karl von Freyburg, then the number 4 must signify an element which fits into that interpretation or, in other words, it must refer to von Freyburg's regiment in the Kaiser Guard, as Rönnebeck states. On the other hand, if we do not accept that fact and return to these initials as formal elements of visual imagery, the possibilities for meaning in these letters and numbers open and we are free to construct new interpretations for the painting which do not rely on Hartley's biography or on his relationship to von Freyburg.

### Postmodern Analysis

As the museum description cited above as well as several art historians note, Hartley engages with the visual

vocabulary of Cubism, remolds it, and mixes it with his own incarnation of Expressionism.<sup>14</sup> Robertson, McDonnell, and Weinberg make cases as well for ties between Hartley and militaristic, homosocial undercurrents in Berlin. McDonnell in fact explains that Hartley's painting interacts with certain motifs of homosexuality that pervaded popular images of the German military before World War I.<sup>15</sup> Still, these artistic and social influences are only two veins of culture with which Hartley's painting engages, though they are the main two on which recent scholarship seems to focus. Nevertheless, *Portrait of a German Officer* clearly engages with other elements of artistic and visual culture. Almost every single object in the painting is an appropriated image. Indeed, as Roland Barthes would say, "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture."<sup>16</sup> A strand of this "tissue" which we might consider is Hartley's use of flag imagery. As I have mentioned previously, William H. Robinson has provided a list of the flags which we might expect to find:

Many of the color patterns in these paintings also evoke associations with specific subjects: black-and-white stripes with the historic flag of Prussia (and the

<sup>14</sup> Cassidy, *Marsden Hartley*, 2; Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 64; Weinberg, "Marsden Hartley: Writing on Painting," 129; also, see museum description from the introduction.

<sup>15</sup> McDonnell claims, "... during the time that Hartley lived in Berlin, the German military symbolized homosexuality. It was a deeply rooted trope on the street as well as in popular press and international journalism." McDonnell, "Portrait of Berlin: Marsden Hartley and Urban Modernity in Expressionist Berlin," *Marsden Hartley*, ed. Kornhauser et al. (London, New Haven: Yale University Press), 53.

<sup>16</sup> Barthes, Roland, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.

Hohenzollern monarchy); black, white, and red in horizontal bands with the national flag of the German Empire (adopted in 1871); black, red, and gold horizontal bands with the flag of the German Socialist movement (later the Weimar and Federal Republic); and blue-and-white diamonds with the flag of Bavaria.<sup>17</sup>

Hartley appropriates these flags and recasts them for his own artistic purposes. Though the personal significance of such images might lie implicitly within his representation of them, Hartley cannot remove the signification already intrinsic to these flags. His representation of various flags engages with elements of distinctly German social and political culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. If Hartley encountered these flags on parade in the streets of Berlin, they would have been to him simultaneously a type of presence and a reminder of absence for the German states which they were to represent. In this sense, the flag images function within Hartley's painting as remnants of borrowed cultures, of *appropriated* cultures. However, in this appropriated setting, Hartley converts the images of the flags so that they no longer function as stand-ins for particular German states, they now become elements in his own artistic vocabulary. This vocabulary, furthermore, has personal significance for Hartley and becomes interpretable by viewers in different ways.

Another image clearly appropriated by Hartley is at the very apex of the composition: the Iron Cross. Rönnebeck tells us that Hartley uses the medal designed by Schinkel in 1813 as his

inspiration.<sup>18</sup> This Iron Cross itself comes from an appropriated image which descends from a long lineage of appropriations with its own history that exists outside of Marsden Hartley's sphere of influence. Furthermore, the cross has not ceased its interaction with culture and history upon Hartley's completion of his painting. Honestly, the association of the Iron Cross with the German military reminds me of the shades of Nazism which hang like a shadow over modern history. While that association is obviously not intrinsic to the sign of the Iron Cross itself, nor does it figure into Hartley's own original use for the image, I would argue that it is still now part of the reality which potentially informs viewership of *Portrait of a German Officer*.<sup>19</sup>

Other objects and patterns as well function in a similar manner. For instance, the checker pattern from a chessboard is evidently cited by the artist. As noted above, Rönnebeck states that for Hartley the pattern signifies von Freyburg's love of chess. Perhaps Hartley was in fact inspired by his intimate knowledge of von Freyburg's pastime. Even so, this does not mean that von Freyburg is solely responsible for the game's association with a pattern of

---

<sup>18</sup> Robinson, "Marsden Hartley's *Military*," 16.

<sup>19</sup> To illustrate this, an artist from recent years, Anthony Viti, has enlisted Hartley's imagery of the Iron Cross in his own work commemorating the tragedy of AIDS. Here, the Iron Cross is once again appropriated, just as Hartley has done, and it once again has its meaning changed through use. This is not the Iron Cross of the German military that Marsden Hartley himself appropriates. No, Viti *re*-appropriates Marsden Hartley's already appropriated image of the Iron Cross. See Meyer, Jerry, "Profane and Sacred: Religious Imagery and Prophetic Expression in Postmodern Art," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 33.

---

<sup>17</sup> Robinson, "Marsden Hartley's *Military*" 14.

white-and-black alternating squares. Von Freyburg cannot be the only source upon which Hartley draws for this motif. Further, when I see the pattern, I also think of a racing flag or a mid-century diner's floor tile. While these associations are mundane, banal, and possibly irrelevant to the painting, I feel they demonstrate the plurality of sources of inspiration for any single image. The other objects, often interpreted as accoutrements of a German military uniform, no less exemplify this principle. Hartley cannot, through his painting, have securely patented the meaning for these articles of military regalia nor claimed the monopoly on their signification. In fact, I contend that what makes such objects so clearly identifiable for historians and other viewers is the fact that these images have existed for a long time in places other than *Portrait of a German Officer*. Viewers must have already had access to these codes before the painting existed in order for these images to be understood.

Hartley paints a canvas full of imagery that embraces German military traditions and idolizes German soldiers yet, as I have stated, Hartley himself was American. Still, McDonnell and Robertson both note that Hartley found himself quite at home in Berlin. McDonnell states that Hartley seeks to capture the spectacle of a city that was alive and vibrant, teeming with "crowds, colorful pageants, cleanliness, and beautiful men."<sup>20</sup> In *Portrait of a German Officer*, remembrances of these parades abound

---

<sup>20</sup> McDonnell makes an accurate assumption; Berlin was a young city and in many ways it was welcoming to and full of outsiders. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert note that "33 percent [were] under the age of twenty," while "about three of every five Berliners came from elsewhere". Winter and Robert, *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

with all the banners and motifs of what some might call "empty public rhetoric of war and patriotism."<sup>21</sup> This active and energetic city was the Berlin that Hartley observed while living there intermittently for a period of more than two years.<sup>22</sup> For others, nevertheless, Berlin was an industrial city that functioned "'with the regularity of a motor,' a city where (unlike Walter Benjamin's Paris) people do not promenade."<sup>23</sup> I believe that both of these perceptions of Berlin work upon the painting. With its cascading patterns of squares, triangles, bars, and curves, *Portrait of a German Officer* visually acknowledges all the teeming activity and bustling spectacle which McDonnell maintains was characteristic of Berlin at the time. However, the objects which these shapes represent—their signifieds—are all clearly synthetic and man-made. Their existence in the painting thus reminds the viewer of production and industry. As Robertson states, the military uniform itself represents "the most regimented and institutionalized expression of governmental power."<sup>24</sup> Hartley expresses this static rigidity within his painting yet he imbues it with a passionate rebellion of that same uniformity. While Robertson posits that in the army, the individual becomes a "standardized product," in Hartley's painting, the military uniform is "endowed with a private, erotic power."<sup>25</sup> The spectacle of the city which Hartley captures therefore has two sides to it, one of voluptuous energy, the other of standardized uniformity.

If the military uniform provides the

---

<sup>21</sup> Weinberg, "Writing on Painting," 131.

<sup>22</sup> McDonnell, "Portrait of Berlin," 39.

<sup>23</sup> Winter and Robert, *Capital Cities at War*, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Robertson, *Marsden Hartley*, 63.

most apparently unifying motif of *Portrait of a German Officer*, then the repeated suggestions of buttons, epaulets, helmet plumes, and other paraphernalia formulate a certain military identity for the subject of the portrait. Donna Cassidy shows that the military uniform in Hartley's painting connotes the idolization of the "masculine ideal."<sup>26</sup> She notes too how Hartley depicts the uniform without a body, or the ideal without a corporeal subject. Furthermore, I suggest that the subject of the portrait does not actually exist. The painting is a signifier without a signified. Recent scholarship nevertheless asserts that Karl von Freyburg is the subject of the portrait in order to construct narratives of an ill-starred (possibly unrequited) love story between the artist and his deceased friend. However, while I have maintained that this is a possible interpretation, it is not the only one. Moreover, I do not believe that the painting fundamentally requires a subject to unify its contents under the status of portrait. What if we let the subject remain *un*-unified, fragmented beyond recuperation? This seems more in keeping with the visual and formal elements of the painting itself. All of the objects which we have discussed appear as fragments of a whole, thrown into a jumble, a flurry of discordant imagery. Letters, tassels, feathers, flags, shapes, medals, and all manner of objects bombard the viewer on all levels of representation. They exist on a visual battlefield within the image. Still, where is the subject in all of this? If clothes, flags, and medals create the identity of the subject, then we have the identity without the person. For no *person* is at all represented, despite the aforementioned efforts by art historians to render a

human figure from the arrangement of objects.

### Conclusion

I began my discussion of *Portrait of a German Officer* with a formal analysis in order to root my subsequent arguments in the painting itself. The use of two theories—semiotics and postmodernism—on the other hand, has presented several challenges to my reading of *Portrait of a German Officer*. One primary challenge in working with semiotics came from determining essentially *whose* semiotics. To formulate my own discourse, I looked to Ferdinand de Saussure for help, as well as Rosalind Krauss, Norman Bryson, and Mieke Bal as I tried to blend my understanding of these differing approaches into my own synthesis of the theory. I found it necessary to restrict my analysis to a treatment of the letters and numerals or, the elements of written language represented in the painting. In my estimation, art historians often use these elements merely to reinforce their interpretations which favor the artist's biography and scholars often seem to overlook the characters' potential implications as signs. Still, in order to maintain a clear and succinct argument, I felt obliged to occlude an examination of the roles of other signs which also exist in the painting but which function differently, in particular the flag-images.

I sought then to address the flag-images as objects of appropriation by the artist in my postmodern approach to the painting. My obstacles with using postmodernism to read this image primarily sprang from my own temptations to place the painting within the context of Hartley's biography. Several sources which I considered, including McDonnell, Robertson, Cassidy, and Weinberg, deal with Hartley's visual

---

<sup>26</sup> Cassidy, *Marsden Hartley*, 229.

quotation and appropriation, though they mostly broach the subject from biographical perspectives of Hartley as an individual. This tendency seemed directly at odds with my previous semiotic analysis in which I sought to separate interpretation of the painting from the artist's biography. My goal became, therefore, to show how several elements in the painting itself demonstrate Hartley's appropriation and distillation of imagery and how the painting, not Hartley, interacts with specific visual and cultural processes.

### Bibliography

- Bal, Mieke and Norman Bryson. "Semiotics and Art History." *The Art Bulletin* 73 (1991): 174-208.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." In *Image, Music, Text*. Edited and translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Berghahn, V. R. *Imperial Germany 1871-1918: Economy, Society, Culture, and Politics*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1994.
- Cassidy, Donna. *Marsden Hartley: Race, Region, and Nation*. Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2005).
- Krauss, Rosalind. "In the Name of Picasso." *October* 16 (1981): 5-22.
- McDonnell, Patricia. *Dictated by Life: Marsden Hartley's German Paintings and Robert Indiana's Hartley Elegies*. Minneapolis: Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, 1995.
- McDonnell, Patricia. "'Essentially Masculine': Marsden Hartley, Gay Identity, and the Wilhelmine German Military." *Art Journal* 56 (1997): 62-68.
- McDonnell, Patricia and Marsden Hartley. "Marsden Hartley's Letters to Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky 1913-1914." *Archives of American Art Journal* 29 (1989): 35-44.
- McDonnell, Patricia. "Portrait of Berlin: Marsden Hartley and Urban Modernity in Expressionist Berlin." *Marsden Hartley*. Edited by Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser with Ulrich Birkmaier et al. London, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Portrait of a German Officer." Accessed April 5, 2012.  
<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/210008711>.
- Robertson, Bruce. *Marsden Hartley*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995.
- Robinson, William H. "Marsden Hartley's Military." *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 76 (1989): 2-26.
- Rumbold, Sir Horace. *The War Crisis in Berlin July-August 1914*. London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1940.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by Wade Baskin. New York, Toronto, London: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1959).
- Walker, Hudson D. "Marsden Hartley." *The Kenyon Review* 9 (1947): 248-259.
- Winter, Jay and Jean-Louis Robert. *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Weinberg, Jonathan, "Marsden Hartley: Writing on Painting." *Marsden Hartley*. Edited by Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser with Ulrich Birkmaier et al. London, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.